The Walking Dead: Draugr and Aptrgangr in Old Norse Literature

Part I: Introduction and Description of the Walking Dead

For the Vikings, the concept of the afterlife was often much more immediate than glorious skaldic tales of Valholl or the Christian's Heaven: once the dead body was placed within the grave, it was believed to become "animated with a strange life and power" (Hilda Ellis-Davidson. The Road to Hel. Westport CT, Greenwood P., 1943. p. 96). The dead person continued a sort of pseudo-life within the grave, not as a spirit or ghost, but as an actual undead corpse similar in many respects to the "nosferatu" or central European vampire (Ellis-Davidspn, Road to Hel, p. 92).

The undead were known by various names. The "haugbui" (from "haugr" meaning "howe" or "barrow") was a mound-dweller, the dead body living on within its tomb. The haugbui was rarely found far from its burial place, and is the type of undead usually found in Norwegian saga material. The "draugr" was "the animated corpse that comes forth from its grave mound, or shows restlessness on the road to burial" (Ellis-Davidson, Road to Hel, p. 80). Also known as "aptrgangr" (lit. "after-goer," or "one who walks after death") the draugr is the roaming undead most frequently encountered in the Icelandic sagas. Whichever name is used, the undead of Scandinavia was a physical body, the actual corpse of the deceased, and though the term "ghost" may be used to describe it, modern connotations of a phantom or incorpoeal spirit do not apply to these supernatural creatures.

The physical descriptions of the undead further reinforce the idea of a walking corpse. The undead is said to be "hel-blar" ("black as death" or "blue as death") or "na-folr" ("corpse-pale). In Eyrbyggja Saga, a shepherd who is killed by a draugr and who is destined himself to become undead is said to be "coal-black," and the draugr that killed him is "hel-blar" when disinterred (Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards, trans. Eyrbyggja Saga. Buffalo, U of Toronto P, 1973. pp 115 & 187). Glamr, the undead shepherd of Grettirs Saga, was reported to be dark blue in color (Denton Fox and Hermann Palsson, trans. Grettirs Saga. Toronto, U of Toronto P, 1974. p. 72), and in Laxdaela Saga the bones of a dead sorceress who had appeared in dreams were dug up and found to be "blue and evil looking" (Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palsson, trans., Laxdaela Saga. NY, Penguin, 1969. p. 235).

The undead corpse was rendered yet more terrifying by its propensity to swell to enormous size. This property of the undead was apparently not due to gasses released by decay, for the body of the draugr was also found

to be enormously heavy, and was often described as being uncorrupted, even many years after death. Thorolf of Eyrbyggja Saga was "uncorrupted, and with an ugly look about him... swollen to the size of an ox," and his body could not be raised without levers, it was so heavy (Palsson & Edwards, Eyrbyggja Saga, p. 187. See also Grettirs Saga, p. 115).

The size attributed to the draugr was a way of expressing the vast strength of the creature. The sagas describe the struggles of kinsmen to straighten the body for burial (Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards, trans., Egils Saga. NY, Penguin, 1976, p. 150. See also Eyrbyggja Saga, p. 114). The aptrgangr often demonstrated its power by literraly crushing its victim to death. Glamr's attack leaves a shepherd "with his neck broken and every bone in his body crushed" (Fox and Palsson, Grettirs Saga, p. 74. See also Eyrbyggja Saga, p. 115). Frequently, in describing battles between a saga hero and a draugr where the hero is a man acknowledged to have enormous strength himself, the fight was often an unsure thing, with the combatants struggling back and forth, evenly matched in the deadly contest (Nora Kershaw, trans., "Hromundar saga Greipssonar," in Stories and Ballads of the Far Past. Cambridge, University P., 1921, p. 68. See also Grettirs Saga, p. 37).

The draugr also at times exhibited powers of a magical nature, possessing knowledge of the future (Peter G. Foote and David M. Wilson, The Viking Achievement. London, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1970. p. 405), controlling the weather (Ellis-Davidson, Road to Hel, p. 163), and shape-shifting. The dead could appear in many forms, such as a seal (Palsson and Edwards, Eybyggja Saga, p. 165. See also Laxdaela Saga, p. 80), a great flayed bull, a grey horse with no ears or tail and a broken back, or a cat that would sit upon a sleeper's chest and grow steadily heavier until the victim suffocated (Jacqueline Simpson, Icelandic Folktales and Legends. Berkeley, U of California P, 1972. p. 166. Also personal experience... my Norwegian Forest Cat does the same thing, even though I'm pretty sure he's not a draugr!). The draugr Thrain shape-shifted into a "cat-like creature" (kattakyn) in Hromundar saga Greipssonar:

> Then Thrain turned himself into a troll, and the barrow was filled with a horrible stench; and he stuck his claws into the back of Hromund's nack, tearing the flesh from his bones... (Kershaw, P. 68)

The draugr could also move magically through the earth, swimming through solid stone as does Killer-Hrapp:

> Then Olaf tried to rush Hrapp, but Hrapp sank into the ground where he had been standing and that was the end of their encounter (Magnussen and Palsson, Laxdaela Saga, p. 103).

This certainly would have been a useful talent, alowing the undead to enter or leave its burial place at will.

Part II: The Dwelling Place of the Draugr

The dwellingt-place of the draugr was the burial mound. Although Scandinavian burial practices varied, with ship-burials, various cremation practices, cairn burials and Christian gravesites all testified to by literature and archaeology, the sagas depict burial in a howe or barrow as the most prevalent means of disposal of the dead (Ellis-Davidson, Road to Hel, pp. 10 and 34). The barrow was a stone-built burial chamber roofed with wood and covered with a great mound of earth (Nora K. Chadwick, "Norse Ghosts: A Study in the Draugr and the Haugbui," in Folklore 57(1948), p. 50). The burial mound of Kar the Old in Grettirs saga was a large chamber roofed with rafters and covered by a dirt mound (Fox and Palsson, Grettirs Saga, p. 36). Haralds saga Harfagra tells of a mound "constructed of stones, mortar and timber" (Snorri Sturluson, "Haralds saga Harfagra," in Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway, trans. Lee M. Hollander. Austin, U of Texas P, 1964, p. 64). In Olafs saga Tryggvasonar, Jarl Hakon of Hlathir is interred in a mound-like construction to hide from Olaf:

> Then the thrall dug a deep pit, carrying the dirt away and then covering the excavation with timbers. Thora told the earl the news that Olaf Tryggvason had entered the fjord and slain his son Erlend.Thereupon the earl and Kark went down into the pit, and Thora covered it with timbers and swept dirt and dung over it and drove the swine over it. That pigsty was beneath a big boulder" (Ibid., "Olafs saga Tryggvasonar," p. 191).

While this is not a grave-mound, per se, it is indicated to the reader to be a place of the dead by the presence of the boulder, or grey stone, above it: the undead and dwarves alike are said to live beneath such stones.

Often a barrow's presence was made clear by a great light that seemed to glow from the mound like fox-fire. This fire "surrounds the howes and forms a barrier between the worlds of the living and the dead" (Ellis-Davidson, Road to Hel, p. 161). Grettir views such a flame burning upon the barrow of Kar the Old:

> ... it happened late one evening, when he was getting ready to go home, that he saw a huge fire burst forth on the headland below Audun's farm.... "If such a thing were seen in my country," said Grettir, "it would be said that the flame came from a buried treasure." The farmer said, "The owner of this fire, I think, is one whom it is better not to enquire about" (Fox and Palsson, Grettirs Saga, p. 36).

Burial mounds were often found near a family's dwelling, and Anglo-Saxon boundary charters list many instances of barrows as landmarks on the edge of an estate (Hilda Ellis-Davidson, "The Hill of the Dragon: Anglo-Saxon Burial Mounds in Literature and Archaeology," in Folklore 64(1950), pp. 173-174). Traditionally, a person inheriting land had to be able to name his ancestors who held the land before him, and point out the barrow in which the ancestor was laid, in order to be eligible to inherit. This may also have been the reason for the careful recording of the location of the howes of the dead settlers of Iceland in Landnamabok (Ellis-Davidson, Road to Hel, p. 36). Scandinavian draugar are further associated with certain types of landscapes, notably the "hvammr," "a short valley or dell, surrounded by mountains, but open on one side in one direction" (reidar T, Christiansen, "The Dead and the Living," in Studia Norvegica 2 (Oslo, 1946), pp. 88-89). Certain traditions record a tradition of the dead "dying into a mountain," equating this sort of mountain with a burial mound (Palsson and Edwards, Eyrbyggja Saga, pp. 41 and 51). The hvammr represented a boundary area between valley and mountain, between farm and burial mound, between the living and the dead. The hvammr, surrounded by tall mountains, would receive little direct sunlight, and none at all for several weeks in midwinter. Forsaeludale (literally, "Shadow Valley"), the site of Glamr's hauntings in Grettirs saga, was such a place (Fox and Palsson, Grettirs Saga, p. 69). It is interesting to note that "the dead were expected to return at Christmas or the New Year, the old season of Yule which marked midwinter" (Ellis-Davidson, "The Restless Dead," p. 162; see also Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palsson, trans., The Vinland Sagas. NY, Penguin, 1965, p. 88; Eyrbyggja Saga, p. 115; and Grettirs Saga, pp. 73-75), and the attacks of the undead began late in autumn and intensified as the winter deepened, precisely the time of year in which the hours of darkness are longest. The draugr might also have the ability to create a temporary darkness in daylight hours to mask its approach, or to call up a mist to hide its activities (Chadwick, "Norse Ghosts," p. 54). At night the draugr moved in a shifting landscape of moonlight and darkness such as Grettir experienced during his fight with Glamr:

> Outside the light was bright but intermittent, for there were dark clouds which passed before the moon and then went away (Fox and Palsson, Grettirs Saga, 78. Nearly identical descriptions are to be found in Magnbus Magnusson and Herman Palsson, trans., Njals Saga. NY, penguin, 1969, p. 173; and in Incelandic Folktales and Legends, pp. 133-136).

These half-lit conditions often reveal a flash of light upon bare bone or the glow of the moon shimmering upon the draugr's eyes, intensifying the horror of the episode.

The sagas depicted a "conception of the dead man dwelling in his howe as in an earthly house watching jealously over his possessions" (Ellis-Davidson, Road to Hel, p. 90). The mound was the hall of the dead, as in Thorsteins thattr uxafots where Thorstein is invited to the "homestead" of a haugbui which is furnished with mead-benches and warbands (Jacqueline Simpson, "Thorsteins thattr uxafots, " in The Northmen Talk. Madison, U of Wisconsin P, 1965, pp. 218-220), or Helga Fell the "Holy Mountain," into which the relatives of Thorolf Mosturbeard died, which had "great fires burning inside it, and the noise of feasting and clamor over the ale-horns" (Palson and Edwards, Eyrbyggja Saga, pp. 41 and 51). In Old English poetry, the essence of a hal lwas the treasure and gifts which were distributed within it (Kathryn Hume, "The Concept of the Hall in Old English Poetry," in Anglo-Saxon England 3, ed. Peter Clemoes. Cambridge, University Press, 1974, p. 64), and certainly the barrow was known as a place of costly treasures: "A great treasure of gold and silver was gathered there, and under the man's feet was a chest full of silver" (Fox and Palsson, Grettirs Saga, p. 37. Great treasures are also described in Thorsteins thattr bajarmagns, trans. by Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards in Gautrek's Saga and Other Medieval Tales. NY, Penguin, 1970, p. 139; also in Thorsteins thattr uxafots, p. 219). Thus in some ways the undead was related to the Scandinavian dwarves, who possessed such treasures as Freyja's necklace Brisingamen and who lived inside rocks, under stones, or within boulders (There are too many references to dwarves in the literature to list all See "Sorla thattr" trans. by G.N. Garmonsway and Jacqueline Simpson in Beowulf and Its Analogues. NY, E.P. Dutton, 1968, p. 298; or "Alvissmal" trans. by Lee M. Hollander in The Poetic Edda, Austin, U of Texas P, 1962, p. 111, or in "Thorsteins thattr bajarmagns," p. 126). The names of the "deep-dwelling dwarfs" of Dvergatal, "The Catalog of Dwarves," "seem to refer to the nether world of death, cold, dissolution" (Lee M. Hollander, trans., "Dvergatal," in The Poetic Edda, pp. 322-323)

The presence of great wealth within the burial mound attracted the attention of grave-robbers, both historically and in the literary record, hence tales such as Grettirs saga were lent authenticity by details of actual grave breakings:

> Grettir began to break open the mound, and worked hard without stopping until he reached the rafters, late in the afternoon. Then he tore them up. Audun did his best to discourage him from entering the mound. Grettir told him to watch the rope, "for I am going to find out what inhabits the barrow." Then Grettir went inside the mound. Inside it was dark, and the air not very sweet (Fox and Palsson, Grettirs Saga, pp. 36-37).

However, the would-be grave-robber had to be wary, for the haugbui was a jealous guardian of its treasures, and would viciously attack those who

disturbed him in his house:

> Grettir took all the treasure and carried it towards the rope, but as he was making his way through the barrow he was seized fast by someone. He let go of the treasure and turned to attack, and they set on each other mercilessly, so that everything in their way was thrown out of place. The mound-dweller attacked vigorously, and for a while Grettir had to give way, but finally he realized that this was not a good time to spare himself. Then they both fought desperately, and moved towards the horse bones, where they had a fierce struggle for a long time. Now the one and now the other was forced to his knees, but in the end the mound-dweller fell backwards, and there was a great crash. Then Audun ran away from the rope, thinking that Grettir must be dead (Ibid., p. 37).

In addition to teeth, claws and main strength, the haugbui might also use "trollskap," evil magic, to defend its home as does Agnarr in Gull-thoris saga (Chadwick, "Norse Ghosts," p. 55), or the evil haugbui Mithothyn, whose corpse "emitted such foul plagues that he almost seemed to leave more loathsome reminders of himslef dead than when alive" (Saxo Grammaticus, The History of the Danes, trans. Peter Fisher. Totowa, Rowman and Littlefield, 1979, Vol. I, p. 26). Further, the haugbui was not always the only fearful inhabitant of the barrow. Some sagas refer also to the mother of the dead man, "who has long claws and is in consequence described as a "ketta" (she-cat), amd is even more formidable than her monstrous son" (Nora K. Chadwick, "The Monsters and Beowulf," in The Anglo-Saxons: Studies in Some Aspects of their History and Culture Presented to Bruce Dickens, ed. Peter Clemoes. London, Bowes and Bowes, 1959, p. 178).

Part III: Precautions Against the Walking Dead

While the haugbui was often content to remain within its grave, harming only those who trespassed upon its domain, the draugr was known to venture outside the mound, causing great harm to the living. Fear of the malevolent actions of the dead was very real in Scandinavia. Precautions taken to prevent the dead from rising again were practiced from the Viking Age to the present century:

> "...in old-fashioned homes [certain antique practices] were very carefully followed; a paid of open scissors laid on the dead person's chest, small pieces of straw laid crosswise under the shroud. The great toes were tied together so that the legs could not be seperated. Needles were run into the soles of the feet, and when the coffin was carried out, the bearers, just within the threshold of the door, raised and lowered it three times in different directions so as to form a

> cross. When the coffin had left the house, all chairs and stools on which it had rested were upset, all jars and sauce-pans turned upside down, and when the parson in the church-yard prays for the rest of the dead, he is supposed to bind the dead to the grave with magic words, to keep him fast" (H.F. Feilberg, "The Corpse-Door: A Danish Survival," in Folklore 18 (1907), p. 366).

Further, special "corpse-doors" were to be found in homes, bricked-up openings that could be torn open for the removal of the coffin, feet-first, and then closed firmly again to deny the dead access to the home, since it was believed that the unquiet dead could only return the way they had come, and by carrying the body out feet-foremost, the living further protected themselves from the dead by denying them a clear view of the path taken to burial (Ibid, pp. 364-369). The very same precautions are recorded in Eyrbyggja Saga:

> Arnkel went into the living room and across the hall to get behind Thorolf. He warned everyone to be careful not to go in front of the corpse until the eyes had been closed. Then he took Thorolf by the shoulders and had to use all his strength before he could force him down. After that he wrapped some clothes around Thorolf's head and got him ready for burial according to the custom of the time. He had a hole broken through the wall behind Thorolf and the corpse was dragged outside (Palsson and Edwards, Eyrbyggja Saga, p. 114).

Part IV: Draugr Attacks and Slaying the Undead

The dead budy was a vehicle of plague and illness, such as that ofthe sorceror Mithothyn of Saxo Grammaticus, but in a day and age in which germ theory was unknown, the causative agent was perceived to be the evil intent of the draugr. Thus it followed that the dead might also make physical attacks against the living. The draugr was believed to feel a longing for the things of life, and even envy of those yet alive. This notion is poignantly described in Fridthjofs saga, when a dying king declared:

> My howe shall stand beside the firth. And there shall be but a short distance between mine and Thorsteinn's, for it is well that we should call to one another (Ellis-Davidson, Road to Hel, p. 91).

The idea of dead friends calling greetings from grave to grave is a peaceful one, exhibiting a wistful desire for the friendship experienced while yet living. However, this desire for the things of life often took on more dangerous overtones as in the story of Killer-Hrapp, a brutal man who

declared to his wife on his deathbed,

> I want my grave to be dug under the living-room door, and I am to be placed upright in it under the threshold, so that I can keep an even better watch over my house.

The saga goes on to say that

> Hrapp soon died and all his instructions were carried out, for Vigdis [his wife] did not dare do otherwise. And difficult as he had been to deal with during his life, he was now very much worse after death, for his corpse would not rest in its grave... (Magnusson and Palsson, Laxdaela Saga, pp. 77-78).

The draugar who most dramatically demonstrate the desire for their past life are those that appear in Eyrbyggja saga. The ghosts of drwoned Thorodd and his crew, dripping wet, and the mud-covered band of draugar led by Thorir Wood-Leg invade the living-room of the hall at Frodriver:

> The people bolted out of the room, as you'd expect, and that evening they had to do without light, heating-stones, and everything else the fire could give (Palsson and Edwards, Eyrbyggja Saga, pp. 166-167).

These undead not only deprive the inhabitants of Frodriver of the benefits of thei hall at night, while they are present the wage mud-fights, no doubt damaging the hall and rendering it uninhabitable by day as well.

In the sagas, "those who die have not gone to a better place, they are on the contrary driven away from the comfort of their homes and the company of their kin. They feel cold and hungry" (Christiansen, "The Dead and the Living," p. 10). It is no wonder then that the draugr should come to resent the living, and at times walk again to reclaim a place they feel is rightfully theirs. This envy of the living is related to the motive driving the most powerful and dangerous of draugar: their insatiable hunger. This hunger is seen in the encounter of Aran and Asmund, sword brothers, who made an oath that if one should die, the other would sit vigil with him for three days inside the burial mound. This when Aran died, Asmund equipped his brother's barrow with his possessions, his banners and armor, hawk, hound, and horse. Then Asmund set himself to wait the three days:

> During the first night, Aran got up from his chair and killed the hawk and hound and ate them. On the second night he got up again from his chair, and killed the horse and tore it into pieces; then he took great bites at the horse-flesh with his teeth, the blood streaming down from his mouth all the while he was eating.... The third night Asmund became very drowsy, and the first thing he knew, Aram had got him by the ears and torn them

> off (Palsson and Edwards, "Egils saga einhenda ok Asmundar saga berserkjabana," in Gautrek's Saga and Other Medieval Tales, pp. 99-101).

Saxo Grammaticus, who recounts the same basic story, adds, "... but horse nor dog sated its hunger; swiftly it turned its lightning talons to slash my cheek and take off my ear" (Saxo Grammaticus, Vol I, p. 151; Other hungry ghosts include Glamr of Grettirs saga and Thrain of Hromundar saga Greipssonar, p. 67). The implication is clear that the draugr, having devoured the animals interred with him in the mound, had determined to make Asmund his next grisly meal. The unnatural hunger of the draugr was perhaps a physical manifestation of its desire for life. It is for this reason that modern commentators often link the draugr and the vampire. "In these tales the corpse within the grave is always represented with vampre-like propensities, superhuman strength, and a fierce desire to destroy any living creature which ventures to enter the mound" (Ellis-Davidson, Road to Hel, p. 92).

The draugr's victims were not restricted to trespassers in its mound. The roaming ghosts decimated livestock by running the animals to death while either riding them or pursuing them in some hideous, half-flayed form. Shepherd, whose duties to their flocks left them out of doors at night time, were also particular targets for the hunger and hatred of the undead:

> ... the oxen which had been used to haul Thorolf's body were ridden to death by demons, and every single beast that came near his grave went raving mad and howled itself to death. The shepherd at Hvamm often came racing home with Thorolf after him. One day that autumn neither sheep nor shepherd came back to the farm" (Palsson and Edwards, Eyrbyggja Saga, p. 115).

Stabled animals and unwary travellers were crushed and broken by the draugr, and those unwary enough to open hall doors after nightfall for a knocking visitor might never be seen again:

> And when they were at meat there came a loud sharp blow at the door. Then one of them said, "Good tidings must be near now." He ran out, and they thought that he was long coming back. The Iostan and his men went out, and saw him that had gone out stark mad, and in the morning he died (Gudbrandr Vigfusson and F. York Powell, "Floamanna saga," in Origines Islandicae. Oxford, Clarendon, 1905, Vol II, p. 646).

The Icelandic custom was to tap three times at the windows after dark, and "a knock, especially if it were only a single stroke, was a sure sign of a ghost or other evil creature seeking entry" (Simpson, Icelandic Folktales and Legends, pp. 135-136).

Although staying indoors at night was safer than venturing outside when a draugr was about, the creature might attack the hall itself:

> At night the people at Hvamm used to hear loud noises from outside, and it often sounded to them as if there was somebody sitting astride the roof (Palsson and Edwards, Eyrbyggja Saga, p. 115).

This type of onslaught was known as house-riding, and the draugr used its enormous strength to batter the roof, while the drumming of its heels terrified the inhabitants within:

> Someone seemed to be climbing the house and then straddling the roof-top above the hall, and beating his heels against the roof so that every beam in the house was cracking (Fox and Palsson, Grettirs Saga, p. 57)

The draugr's attack could also be intended to gain entry into the hall by destroying the doors:

> The entire frame of the outer door had been broken away, and a crude hurdle tied carelessly in its place. The wooden partition which before had seperated the hall from the entrance passage had also broken away, both below and above the crossbeam (Ibid.).

Overcoming the dead would seem to have been quite difficult, but the Scandinavians believed that even the dead could die again:

> I can tell with truth, I say,
> For I have seen all the worlds 'neath the welkin.
> Niflhel beneath nine worlds I saw,
> There men die out of Hel.
> (Hollander, "Vafthruthnismal," The Poetic Edda, p. 50)

Although iron weapons could harm the draugr, as with many supernatural creatures, cold iron was not sufficient to stop the dead from walking. First, the draugr must be overcome by grappling hand-to-hand with the creature, and wrestling withit until it was subdued (Simpson, Icelandic Folktales and Legends, p. 107). The hero next must decapitate the ghost, often with a sword found in the draugr's own barrow (Chadwick, "Norse Ghosts," p. 55). This was at times a difficult task, for in some traditions the hero was required to leap between the head and the body before the corpse hit the ground, or walk widdershins three times between the head and body afterwards, or drive a wooden stake into the headless body in the same manner other cultures used to dispose of vampires (Saxo Grammaticus, Vol. I, p. 150 and Vol. II, p. 89). The final step in dispatching the draugr was to

burn the remains to cold ashes and then bury the ashes in a remote spot or throw them out to sea: only then was the undead truly dead and destined to rise no more (Ellis-Davidson, Road to Hel, pp. 37-38).

Part V: Parallels between the Scandinavian Draugr and Beowulf's Grendel

(All Old English is from Frederick Klaeber's edition of Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg. 3rd ed. Lexington MA; D.C. Heath & Co., 1950. All translations to modern English and any mistakes therin are my own.)

Parellels can be drawn between Beowulf and Grettirs Saga based on the similarities between Beowulf's encounter with Grendel in heorot and Grettir's struggle with Glamr at Thorhallsstadir. These two tales have more in common than just their plots, however, for there are many similarities between their monstrous adversaries: "The important thing is that Grendel is related to the corpse demon (aptrgangr) Glamr..." (Nicholas K. Kiessling, "Grendel: A New Aspect," Modern Philology, 65 (1968), p. 201). In many respects, Grendel himself seems to exhibit the characteristics of the walking dead.

Chadwick, in her analysis of words used in Beowulf to describe Grendel, points out that Anglo-Saxon glossaries relate these descriptions to Latin words "associated with the underworld, with necromancy and the harmful influence of the spirits of the dead" (Chadwick, "The Monsters and Beowulf," p. 175). Like the draugr, "swollen to the size of an ox," Grendel is "mara thonne aenig man odther" (l. 1353, "greater in size than any other man") and possesses strength proportional to his size which enables him to carry fifteen men away to his lair:

Thonne he Hrodthgares	heordth-geneatas
sloh on sweofote	slaepende fraet
folces Denigea	fyftyne men,
and odther swylc	ut offerede
ladthlicu lac.	(ll. 1580-1584a)

(Then Hrothgar's	hearth companions
he slew in their beds,	ate them sleeping,
of the Danish people	fifteen men,
another fifteen likewise	he carried off-
a hateful gift.)	

It would also seem that Grendel shared with the undead the ability to shape-shift. As O'Keefe points out, Grendel is clearly described as a man by the words "guma" (ll. 973, 1682), "haeledtha" (l. 2072), "rinc" (l. 720), and "wer" (l. 105), and yet he also partakes of a monstrous nature

(Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, "Beowulf, Lines 702b-836: Transformations and Limits of the Human," in Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 23 (1981), p. 486). After his disasterous encounter with Beowulf, the arm left behind by Grendel is seen to be a sort of taloned paw:

... foran aeghwylc waes,
stidthra naegla gehwylc style gelicost
haethenes handsporu hilderinces
eglu unheoru... (ll. 984b - 987a)

(... at the end of each
every one of the hard nails was most like steel
the handspurs of the heathen warrior
were awful, monstrous things...)

This description recalls the cat-like form assumed by the draugr Thrain of Hromundar saga Greipssonar while battling Hromund.

Grendel exhibits the vampire-like propensities of the draugr as well. Kiessling links the word "maere" (ll. 103, 762) used to describe Grendel with the Latin "lamia," "a blood-drinking witch," based on the evidence of Old English glossaries (Kiessling, "Grendel: A New Aspect," pp. 195-196). Grendel himself certainly drinks the blood of doomed Hondscioh:

Ne thaet se aglaeca yldan thohte,
ac he gefeng hradthe forman sidthe
slaepende rinc, slat unwearnum
bat banlocan, blod edrum drank...

(Nor did the combatant think to delay
but he quickly caught the first time
a sleeping man, greedily tore him,
bit the joint, drank the blood streams...)

Grendel's abode may also be related to the barrow of the draugr. The dwellings of the dead were often said to be located beneath a stone or boulder, and the mere of Grendel is likewise to be found beneath a "harne stan" (l. 1415, "grey stone"). There are three other occurences of the phrase "under harne stan" in Beowulf, each describing the lair of a dragon (ll. 887, 2553, 2744). Old English literature firmly links dragons to barrows: "To the Anglo-Saxon poets there is little doubt that a burial mound containing treasure was the 'hill of the dragon.'" (Ellis-Davidson, "The Hill of the Dragon," p. 178). The dragon's lair in Beowulf is explicitly described many times as a barrow ("beorh"), and after Beowulf has directed Wiglaf to seek out the dragon's treasure "under harne stan" (l. 2744), the young warrior obeys and retrieves the gold from "under beorges

hrof" (l. 2755, "under a barrow's roof"). Thus the description "under harne stan" acts as a kenning for a barrow, a form of verbal shorthand conveying the idea of the supernatural and the home of the dead.

The mere itself has connections to the dwelling of the dead: "thaer maeg nihta gehwaem nidthwundor seon, fyr on flode" (ll. 1365-1366a, "There each night may be seen a fearful wonder, fire on the flood.") The waters of the mere burn with a dread fire, like the flame that is seen above the barrows of the dead. The water of the mere and the "fyrgenstream" (ll. 1359, 2128) also recall descriptions of the dragon's barrow: "hlaew under hrusan holmwylme neh, ydthgewinne" (ll. 2411-2412a, "the howe under the earth near the sea-surge, the wave-strife") and "standan stanbogan, stream ut ponan brecan of beorge (ll. 2545-2546a, "a standing stone arch, from it a stream that burst forth from the barrow"). Like Beowulf's barrow (ll. 2156-3158), the howes of many Scandinavian draugar are built upon headlands near the sea (see for example Egils Saga, p. 150). Thus the mere, too, is recognized as a place of the dead.

The land around the mere is reminiscent of the hvammr in which so many aptrgangar are found. The mere is located beneath enclosing mountains within a narrow valley, in a place where the hills restrict the light of the sun:

...	Hie dygel lond
warigeadth wulfhleothu	windige naessas,
frecne fengelad,	dthaer fyrgen stream
under naessa genithu	nither gewitedth...
(ll. 1357b - 1360)	

(...	They hold to a secret land
ward the wolf-slopes,	the windy headlands
the dangerous fen-paths;	there the mountain stream
under dark hills	goes downwards...)

and

Ofereode tha	aethlinga bearn
steap stanhlidtho,	stige nearwe,
enge anpadthas,	uncudth gelad
neowle naessas...	(ll. 1408 - 1411a)

(The aethling's son	rode over
the steep rocky slopes,	the narrow paths,
single-file tracks,	strange ways,
steep hills...)	

This landscape, like the hvammr, is also a place of boundaries, for Grendel is known as the "mearcstapa" (l 103a, "rover of the borders").

beneath the waters of the mere, Beowulf enters the "nidthsele" (l. 1513a, "hostile hall"), the home of the Grendel-kin. Like a barrow, it is described as a hall --- or rather, as the inverse of a hall: "Anti-halls of this sort gain poetic resonance from their affinities with the grave" (Hume, "The Concept of the Hall in Old English Poetry," p. 68). The "nidthsele" is provided with "fyrleoht" (l. 1557a, "firelight") and furnished with "searwum" and a "sigeeadig bil" (l. 1557, "armor" and "a victory-blessed sword"): rich treasure indeed for a fighting man. Plundering this hoard is not a simple task, for it is guarded by Grendel's mother, as cat-like as her son or the "ketta" found in Scandinavian barrows, with her "grimmum grapum" (l. 1542a, "grim claws").

Grendel's attacks upon the living are motivated by the same force that drives the draugr: envy of the living. Grendel was excluded from Heorot, that "circle of light and peace enclosed by darkness, discomfort and danger" (Ibid., p.11):

Dtha se ellengaest	earfodthlice
thrage getholode,	se the in thystrum bad,
thaet he dogora gehwam	dream gehyrde
hludne in healle;	thaer waes hearpan swaeg,
swutal sang scopes.	(ll. 86 - 90a)

(Then the estranges spirit	hardship
suffered for a time,	he that in darkness dwelt
for every day	he heard rejoicing
loud in the hall;	there was the sound of the harp
the clear song of the scop.)	

This passage has been deliberately placed before the description of Grendel's first attack to suggest to the audience Grendfel's motivation (David Williams, "The Exile as Uncreator," in Mosaic, 8 (1975), p. 11). Grendel, however, is not only deprived of the joy and comfort of Hrothgar's hall, he is also denied participation in the social bonding of lord and theign via the distribution of treasure: "no he thone gifstol gretan moste" (l. 168, "nor was he allowed to approach the gift-throne").

Grendel hungers for the things of life, and this hunger is expressed by his savage feasting upon Hrothgar's retainers. Grendel is separated from the joys of the hall, therefore he will separate the theigns from their "sibbegedriht" (;. 387, "band of kinsmen") as well as from their life (Robert W. Hanning, "Sharing, Dividing, Depriving --- The Verbal Ironies of Grendel's Last Visit to Heorot," in Texas Studies in Literature and

Language, 15 (1973), pp. 204-205). He does this in the same way as the draugr of "Egils saga einhenda ok Asmundar saga berserkjabana":

bat banlocan blod edrum dranc,
synsnaedum swealh; sona haefde
unlyfigendes eal gefeormod,
fet ond folma. (ll. 742 - 745a)

(he bit the joint, drank the blood streams,
swallowed huge morsels; he immediately ate
the dead man all up,
feet and hands.)

The very etymology of Grendel's name indicates "the grinder" or "the destroyer" (Kiessling, "Grendel:A New Aspect," p. 194), a name quite appropriate for a draugr, who were known to kill by crushing their victims to death. Grendel wreaks his revenge upon the living, destroying what he cannot have.

Like the draugr, Grendel is a creature of the night. He is "deogol daedhata deorcum nihtum" (l. 2775, "the hidden doer of hateful deeds in the dark night"), the "scridthan sceadugenga" (l. 703, "the gliding shadow-goer"), who moves through the landscape of shifting shadows and intermittent moonlight so characteristic of the undead: "Sceaduhelma gesceapu scridthan cwoman wan under wolcnum" (ll. 650-651a, "the shadow-cloaked shape comes gliding, black under the clouds.") Grendel conceals his actions beneath a mist, "Dtha com of more under mistleothum Grendel gongan" (ll. 710-711a, "Then he came from the moor, under hills of mist Grendel went"), and the intermittent moonlight suggested by the clouds and mist may be responsible for the gleam of light from Grendel's eyes: "him of eagum stod ligge gelicost leoht un faeger" (ll. 726b-727, "from his eyes came an ugly light, most like a flame").

Upon his arrival at Heorot for the final battle, Grendel announces his presence with the single blow at the door that was ytaken by the Icelandic sagas to be the sign of a ghost seeking entry:

... Duru sona onarn
fyrbendum faest, sythdthan he hire folmum aethran;
onbraed tha bealohydig dtha he gebolgen waes,
recedes muthan. (ll. 721b-724a)

(... The door immediately sprang open
tho fastened with forged bands when he touched it with his hands
driven by evil desire swollen with anger,
he tore open the hall's mouth.)

The destruction of the door and the damage to the hall engendered when Grendel struggles with Beowulf recall the attacks made by the undead against Scandinavian homes:

... Reced hlynsode.
Tha waes wundor micel, Thaet se winsele
widthhaefde heathodeorum, thaet he on hrusan ne feol,
faeger foldbold... (ll. 770-b-773a)

(... The hall resounded.
There was much wonder that the wine-hall
withstood the battle-brave, that the fair earth-dwelling
did not fall to the ground...)

Finally, the methods used to overcome Grendel are those used to lay draugar. Beowulf is intuitively aware that iron swords will be of no avail until he has properly wrestled with the ghost (ll. 677-683, 798-805a, 987b-990). When the two meet in combat, they are nearly evenly matched --- Beowulf can harm his foe, but cannot prevent Grendel from fleeing before the creature is killed (ll. 967-970a). At the end, it is not Beowulf's mighty handgrip that ensures that the menace of the Grendel-kin is ended, but the beheading of the creatures:

... Hra wide sprong
sythdthan he aefter deadthe drepe throwade
heorosweng heardne, and hine tha heafde becearf.
(ll. 1588b-1590)

(... The body bounded wide
when after death it suffered the blow,
the hard sword-swing and thus he cut off his head.)

So ended Grendel, and his mother likewise:

aldres orwena, yrring sloh,
thaet hire width halse heard grapode,
banhringas braec; bil eal dthurhwod
faegne flaeschoman. (ll. 1565-1568a)

(despairing of life, he angrily struck
so that on her neck it bit hard,
broke the bone-rings; the blade went all the way through
the doomed body.)

The physical description of Grendel as a giant shape-shifting creature, a

dweller in a supernatural environment, who acts at nighty in a mist-shrouded landscape out of motives of envy and desire for the things of life, strongly suggests the Norse motif of the walking dead. However, as Kiessling notes, Grendel is "a product of that point in time when the southern, classical and the Scandinavian traditions merged" (Ibid., p. 201). Grendel is possessed of a complex nature, one that incorporates elements from the old Germanic culture of the Anglo-Saxons and the newer influences of Christianity. Each facet of Grendel's nature is different, and examination of any of the many motifs that are integrated to form the complex whole throws new light on the subject, enhancing understanding of the entire poem.

MAGICK
LIBRARY
darkbooks.org
If you enjoy our free ebooks,
please consider making a donation
to offset website costs.
PayPal
Donate

Loved this book?
Other books that may be interesting to you:

Anonymous : "So My Kid Is A Witch"

How to deal with your teens new faith. Books Topics - Introduction - Brief Witchcraft Overview - Strongly Opposed? - References - Closing

Anonymous : "The Lawes Against Witches"

The LAWES against WITCHES AND CONJURATION AND Some brief Notes and Observations for the Discovery of WITCHES. Being very usefull for these Times wherein the DEVIL reignes and prevailes over the soules of poor Creatures in drawing them to that crying Sin of WITCH-CRAFT.Be it enacted by the King our Soveraigne Lord the Lords Spirituall and Temporall and the Commons in this present Parliament assembled and by the authority... >>read more<<

Anonymous : "Thelema A New Spiritual Tradition For A New Age"

THELEMA New Spiritual Tradition for a New Age Is it a religion? a philosophy? a collection of mystical practices? a system of post-modern ethics? Decide for yourself ... There is religion in Thelema for those that require it. There is also freedom from religion in Thelema for those that require it. THE GOAL OF THELEMA To help you realize your True Will the innermost spark of divinity inside youthat holds your lifes purpose on... >>read more<<

Anonymous : "Galdr Verbal Rune Magic"

Galdr or Galdor from the Old Norse originally meant incantation. The verb gala is also used for to crow. It later came to mean magic in general. These are the sounds used in runic oral spells.The Galdr sounds are from Edred Thorssons Futhark a Handbook of Rune Magic.This rune provides success advancement in career a turnabout in luck for those in difficulty. The good luck it provides is not permanent but a single event or a... >>read more<<